

Mindful Parenting during Uncertain Times

By Dr. Marina Heifetz
Child and Adolescent Psychologist

Since the pandemic of COVID19, we have been privy to numerous (excellent!) articles on parenting, self-care, and the never-ending and constantly changing news updates. Mindfulness, a concept defined as being present and aware, with a non-judgemental attitude, has often been noted in these articles as one way to cope with the ongoing stress we are currently experiencing. Mindfulness not only fosters children's feelings of safety, value, and worth, but it also reduces parents' stress. Sounds nice to me!

While the idea of "mindfulness" has been gaining traction and was used by many as a way to slow down in our busy world, it seems to have lost its appeal in a world that has suddenly slowed down and turned itself upside down, so to speak. Duties of work and home life have become blurred, which only serves to perpetuate the anxiety associated with this unprecedented experience. As a parent of three young children and a mental health practitioner, balancing my home and work duties has been a challenge to say the least. What has helped is setting realistic expectations and being mindful of my own and my family's emotional state. It is helpful to have a "feeling check-in" with children of all ages, and to help children identify when their mood changes while guiding them with healthy coping strategies.

In an attempt to contribute to the wonderful collection of supports currently available, I would like to provide a highlight of mindful parenting strategies that I hope can serve to be supportive of mental health in this hectic time.

1) Validate your feelings

It is important to notice and acknowledge how you feel, without judgment. This is a weird time, it is ok to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or desperate for a reprieve. It is human nature to fall into the "should" thinking (e.g., "I should be stronger" or "I should not feel this way"). What is helpful here is to pause and notice this thinking, and allow yourself to accept that it is ok to have the feelings that you do, without judging yourself for having them (e.g., "It is ok to struggle right now").

2) Choose how you respond

After acknowledging the feelings, it is important to work on the thoughts. As Victor Frankl noted in his infamous book *A Man's Search for Meaning*: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

While we may not be able to control the outside world, there are plenty of things we can control around us, starting with our attitude. Thoughts are not facts! Mindful parenting means pausing and responding to our child(ren) from the mindset of curiosity (e.g., "My child is acting out right now, are they finding something difficult?" and "What am I feeling

now?”), rather than getting caught up in reacting. When parents learn to “respond” rather than react, parents may also begin to see that wild, loud, or angry behaviour as not simply “negative,” but a cry for help, or a listening ear. Moreover, when we model through our own behaviours that it is important to pause and reflect, rather than immediately react, children are more likely to internalize these behaviours. After all, actions speak louder than words.

While the idea of pausing and responding from a reflective stance sounds appealing, I admit it is not easy to follow. Here are some helpful steps to help us respond rather than react:

- a) *Timeout for parents:* Self-intervention begins with the *parent* recognizing the need to take a timeout by either physically removing themselves from the situation (if it’s safe to do so) or by taking a mental timeout where the parent may stay with the child(ren) and practice the steps outlined below.
- b) *Inhale-exhale:* It is helpful to begin timeout by focusing on your breath and *slowly* breathe in and out to help calm the sympathetic nervous system. If you feel the mind wander, notice it and gently return attention to the breath.
- c) *Name it:* Now that you can think more clearly, you may wish to reflect, such as “What is it that upset me so much?” “What am I feeling?” “Is my reaction related to something in my past?” and “How much of my response has to do with my child’s stress versus my own?”
- d) *Ground yourself:* Close your eyes, and try to observe the inner judgments that you may have, whether it is toward yourself or your child. Focus on feelings of compassion, forgiveness, and gentle kindness. Ask yourself how *you* would want to be treated in this situation.
- e) *Loosen up:* Take a moment to loosen up, turn on some music, shake, stretch, walk, point is to release energy from your body. You can take some time for a body scan now and take notice of any areas that may have some tension. Loosening up the body will help loosen up the mind and to *see the situation from another perspective*.
- f) *Evaluate your mind:* Take a moment to observe yourself again and ask yourself:
 - Am I able to think clearly?
 - Am I less emotionally aroused?
 - Am I relaxed?
 - Can I find a solution that teaches my child something about life?

This self-intervention is an important step in order to slow down and regulate your emotions, think more rationally, and act in accordance to your goals.

3) Engagement and connection

Rather than thinking “I’m stuck,” you can choose to view COVID19 as an opportunity to connect with your family and reflect on yourself and your life. Taking the time to engage and play with your child(ren) goes a long way in establishing parent-child connection.

When we spend this time with our child(ren), it is important to aim to be present, which means putting away our devices and *really listening* to what they have to say. This interaction shows child(ren) that they are important and fosters healthy confidence and parent-child attachment. Here are a few ideas to connect and engage mindfully with your child(ren):

- Connect to the breath and be still together. There are some great children books out there, such as the *Peaceful Piggy Meditation*, that provide a wonderful guide for younger children to learn to be still. You can also make the breathing exercise playful with younger children by pretending you're breathing in something delicious (e.g., cookies) and breathing out (blowing) birthday candles.
- It is important to bring awareness to the body. Sleep and healthy eating are vital for mental health and it is not always easy to notice ourselves lacking these basic needs, and this is particularly true when we are stressed. As such, a body scan – or simply put paying attention to our body parts - can help bring forth this awareness. With younger children, this can be done playfully, such as pointing a flashlight to body parts and looking “inside” to see how each body part feels.
- Now that things may be more flexible in timing, it is important to slow down and enjoy the moments. Whether it's just staying in an activity you enjoy longer, or through a mindful walk where you use your senses to notice your environment more than you may typically have time for.
- It may be daunting to be distanced from loved ones. It is important to find ways to connect with family and friends, such as through phone or video chats, or sending a card.
- This is a trying time for everyone, it is important to stay positive and although there will be difficult and stressful times, remembering and being thankful for the good times too.

I'd like to end with a quote by Myla Kabat-Zinn that I believe encompasses mindful parenting: “The wonderful gift of mindfulness is that we can stop ourselves and ask: What am I feeling? What is it like from my child's point of view? When you can do that, you often see things that you didn't let yourself see before because you were so caught up in the reactive mode, which is very limiting.”

Dr. Marina Heifetz, Ph.D., is a Child and Adolescent Psychologist at the York Hills Centre and the Clinical Director at the York Region CBT Clinic. She has been a Clinical Director for Special Olympics' Strong Minds program since 2016. Dr. Heifetz specializes in the assessment and treatment of children, adolescents, and families experiencing a range of developmental and mental health conditions, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), anxiety and mood disorders, disruptive behaviour disorders, learning disabilities, and parent-child conflict. She also has a special interest and experience in mindfulness and in supporting individuals with developmental disabilities through research and clinical work.